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Humiliation and the Exercise of Power in the Florentine Contado in the Mid-Fourteenth-Century

Medieval historians have long been preoccupied with the relationship between state authority and cultures of violence, as for example in the debates over the identity of the Italian magnates. The last few decades have also seen a turn to understanding violence in terms of emotionality, recognizing that emotional expression could be an aspect of the exercise of power. Gerd Althoff explored this question in terms of how people, particularly rulers, ‘staged emotions’, using them as a form of ritual communication. One vivid instance is noble anger and violence. Richard Barton argued that nobles in C11th France at times used a show of anger to enforce claims about their prerogatives. A lord might put on a display of affront and rage, to threaten and perhaps seek violent retribution. This contribution builds on the literature on noble anger and the exercise of power by showing its connection with forms of humiliation, drawing on a rich although complex body of sources, mention of emotions in court records. I examine representations of anger and humiliation in mid-fourteenth century denunciations to the Florentine Executor of the Ordinances of Justice. My focus is on three cases in which lords were denounced for the rape and abduction of women. Denouncers to the Executor depicted this in terms of the shame and humiliation of the women’s kinsmen. For the denouncers, these abductions and rapes were, in Susan Brownmiller’s phrase “messages between men”.

Of course, the language of the denunciations was very much shaped by cultural and legal categories. I argue that while the three cases probably reflect social experience - elites using anger, sexuality and humiliation to dominate - the denunciations also reveal rhetorical strategies. One example is a denunciation that depicted a noble driven by rage. It survives in the sentences of the criminal court of the Florentine podestà, and was explicitly adjudicated according to the ordinances of Justice. Chele Nutini from San Godenzo, in the Mugello, the region north of Florence, had both denounced and accused Count Guido Domestico, of the Guidi counts, a old feudal family with extensive rural holdings. The Guidi had ceded San Godenzo to Florence in 1344, two years before this case. Chele’s accusation was based on this jurisdictional change. He charged that Count Guido through force and violence had unjustly required and burdened him by giving him an order. although he was a free popolano of the city and people of Florence. Count Guido had told him that he must go at his own expense to guard a castrum near the Guidi properties at Romandola, as if he were the count’s man, his fidelis. Chele refused to go to the castrum or serve him as a fidelis. Count Guido, “seeing that Chele was amused by his order”, “driven by rage” [furore spiritus instigatus] took over fifty of his men to Chele’s house. They stole all of his grain, wine, household goods and even his animals. Not content with this, they burned the house. “Persevering in his rage”, [in furore perseverans] Count Guido then had his men cut down all the trees and vines on Chele’s land and even destroyed the chestnuts. Count Guido was contumacious and therefore

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3 S. Brownmiller, Against our will: Men, women and rape, New York 1975.

4 On San Godenzo, see P. Pirillo, Forme e strutture del popolamento nel contado fiorentino, vol. 1, Florence 2005, pp. 503-504.
convicted in absentia, sentenced to emend the damages, restore the property, pay a hefty fine and if captured to be burned.5

In effect, Chele - or perhaps his legal advisor - employed a rhetorical strategy that played on stereotypical views of noble emotionality: Count Guido was driven by *furor*, irrational rage. I cannot know whether Count Guido had in fact put on a show of rage, but it is certainly plausible, and probably an effective strategy. The odds of enforcement of the sentence after all were slim. Given what happened to Chele Nutini, surely the next time Count Guido illegally ordered a man to go on guard service, the fellow would be frightened enough to comply. As this sentence suggests, denunciations of noble criminality can be a rich source for depictions of emotions and the violent exercise of power. My focus is denunciations to the Florentine Executor, an office created in 1306 to defend the popular constitution and ensure the enforcement of the Ordinances of Justice, laws which imposed stringent penalties on magnates who injured *popolani*.6

The Executor became as Andrea Zorzi has shown the guarantor of the legal system more generally. The Executor was an outsider appointed for a semester, with his own officials. He was housed in the public palace.7 Anyone could drop a written denunciation in a *tamburo*, or wooden box. There were two, one under the loggia of the Palazzo del Podestà and the other on the palace of the Capitano del popolo. The Executor and his officials along with the Capitano opened them up and read and copied the denunciations once a week, on Fridays. If a charge fit within their legal parameters, they were obligated to hold an inquest. Then if they found sufficient legal grounds, they would relate the case to the criminal court. Of course, denunciations cannot be taken at face value. People crafted representations of events in order to get the Executor's court to take action. Denouncers at least in theory could remain anonymous, so that unlike a person who lodged an accusation, they might suffer little consequences. Some were false, some were clearly intended as pressure tactics, some reveal magnates denouncing each other. It is also evident in many cases that denouncers desperately hoped that the Executor's office would punish serious crimes and protect them. I have found the denunciations revealing because they appear to be less shaped by contemporary legal categories than other forms of charges in the court. They were very often written in the vernacular, a product of the widespread diffusion of education in the *contado* recently documented by Robert Black.8 Often, the denunciations suggest a lack of legal advice. The denouncers told stories, stories that manipulated cultural and political categories as they urged the Executor to act.

The records survive only from after July 1343 on because of the disastrous fire in the Camera del comune at the time of the expulsion of the Duke of Athens. The earliest, 1345-46, have been thoroughly studied by Claudia Caduff.9 Christiane Klapisch-Zuber recently analyzed a sample of denunciations of magnate violence to the Executor, from the years 1344-1350, 1367-1377 and 1400-1405, treating them as a source for popular perceptions of

6 There is a voluminous bibliography on the magnate and the Ordinances of Justice. For a recent study that cites this bibliography, see S. Diaccia, *Popolani e magnati: Società e politica nella Firenze del Duecento*, Spoleto 2011. See also C. Lansing, “Magnate violence revisited”, in *Communes and Despots in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, ed. by John Easton Law and Bernadette Paton, Farnham, Surrey 2010, pp. 35-45
the magnates. Caduff found that three quarters of the 302 denunciations in her period came from the contado. Most were unsuccessful: in 1345, the Executor acted on only about one denunciation in four. Further, 11% of the victims were women and in 40% of those cases the charge was rape, which was significantly higher than the percentage of rape charges in the criminal court. I have read the earliest of the Executor’s criminal registers, 1343-1351, and have assembled about 160 criminal cases.

Three fairly detailed cases from a short period, April 1345-April 1346 describe noble efforts to abduct and rape women. These were not casual, opportunistic rapes. Significantly, in all three cases the nobles came from powerful landowning families: the Bardi, Ricasoli and Pazzi. These lurid narratives emphasize not the woman, but rather the impact on her male kin, which is cast in terms of shame and humiliation. The first case is an inquest held in response to a vernacular denunciation. Someone who termed him or herself the closest kin to Monna Bice, a widow, denounced Totto di Filippozzo de Bardi. The charge was that Totto had with force and violence taken Monna Bice and held and now holds her, against her will and that of all of “her kin and friends” [tutti suoi parenti e amici]. These things are so manifest and public in the land and district of Pozzo, contado of Totto and his brothers Andrea and Francesco, that Buonaccorso nephew or grandson [nipote] of the widow’s husband “grieved and lamented over the shame and outrage he received from Totto [dognedose et ramaricandose de la vergogna et oltraggio che receveva dal dicto Tocto].” The denouncer went on: Totto had several persons tell Buonaccorso that if he stopped his lament, Totto would not remain angry. He also had Buonaccorso told that “he should not remain in this lament, like a person who is kin to Monna Bice and like a man who holds himself shamed [per questo far dire il decto Buonaccorso non se remanea dal decto ramaricamento si come persona distrecta da la decta Monna Bice et si come buono che temea vergognal].” Buonaccorso persisted. So, Totto had Buonaccorso and four of his kinsmen arrested and questioned. Under force, they confessed that they had sought to kill Totto and hand their paese over to the Count of Romena. Totto therefore had Buonaccorso hanged and the others jailed. The denouncer concluded, “for God’s sake, you are begged to punish this crime, in a way that will do honor to you and to your office, and maintain reason and justice”. Evidently, Buonaccorso had reacted to Bice’s kidnap with a public lament. The denouncer explained his motives in terms of his honor: literally, the shame and outrage he had received from Totto, a message between men. Totto perhaps had expected silent compliance and perceived the lament as a challenge. This was a power struggle over the abduction of a woman, framed by the denouncer in terms of male shame. Briefly, the court held an inquest and seven witnesses testified. According to several, including the parish rector, Ser Zanobio the Florentine vicar of Pozzo on Totto’s orders had had the men captured, imprisoned and punished. Why? Totto and his brothers had jurisdictional rights: Buonaccorso was not a Florentine citizen but rather their subject and fidelis. So, the court did not proceed. The intersection of noble violence and state authority is worth noting. Scholars, most recently Thomas Bisson, analyze the acts of violence of medieval nobles in

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11 ASF, Atti del EOG 54, ff. 84 r-86 r. I am grateful to Konrad Eisenbichler and Elena Brizio for help with this text.
terms of opposition to the state. Here, the Florentine territorial state effectively facilitated what the denouncer considered to be seigneurial murder. Who was Totto di Filipozzo? He and his brothers belonged to the Bardi, the famed lineage that rose in the thirteenth century to establish one of the most powerful banks in Europe, bankrolling not only the papacy but European monarchs. Hardly old feudal nobles, they had acquired Pozzo along with two other castles only in 1338. Totto and his brothers were depositors in the Bardi bank. They took part in an armed insurrection against Florence in 1340 and were exiled, but still were paid their shares. The Bardi bank failed in January 1346 after Edward III reneged on his debts.

Totto and his brothers evidently adopted violent strategies to force compliance and claim resources. One major target was lucrative church properties. In July 1348, they gathered a band of armed men at a farm they owned in the Chianti and attacked a parish church, San Cristoforo. The church was vacant, perhaps due to the priest’s death from the plague, and six men from the parish were guarding it. The Bardi and their troops rode up, armed with crossbows, saying “We have already several times broken the popolo of Florence and we can certainly break that of San Cristoforo. The tamburo and the law are in Florence and we are in the country and can do what we wish. We will hang you as thieves from that oak tree”. When one man resisted in the church, they threw him to the ground, saying “Acknowledge that your life is ours [riconoscere la vita per no], filthy thief of a traitor that you are”. When he did not acquiesce, Francesco di Filipozzo killed him with a blow to the head with a sword. Nineteen witnesses testified at the inquest. Ultimately, four Bardi were convicted, all of them contumacious. The sentences were lifted in an amnesty of 1351.

Psychologists analyze humiliation as one of the ‘self-conscious emotions’, which also include guilt, embarrassment and pride. In general, humiliation takes place when someone exposes the shortcomings or misdeeds of another. It requires a social context: humiliation is suffered in public. It is not a medieval category, one of the scholastic passions, although these cases explicitly speak of vergogna, shame. Nevertheless, it is a useful concept to analyze these texts, particularly as William Ian Miller formulated the distinction between shame and humiliation in 1993. Miller defined shaming as degradation of status, “stripping someone of a status she had some right to before the particular failing”. Ordinary humiliation he saw instead as “deflation of pretension”. This is the kind of humiliation professors worry about all the time: the fear of being caught in an embarrassing mistake, a mistake that reveals our failings. From this perspective, both Monna Bice and Buonacorso suffered shame rather than humiliation: that is, not deflation of pretension but a real degradation of status. Bice if the denunciation is true went from respectable widowhood to involuntary servitude.

And yet, in this story, Totto sought to humiliate rather than shame: he literally demanded that Buonacorso cease to act as Bice’s kinsman and as a man shamed by her abduction. The message was: drop your claim to family honor, submit to my treatment of your kinswoman. When Buonacorso resisted, Totto became angry and enforced dominance, inflicting the forced confessions, imprisonments and hanging. Miller also writes

14 A. Sapori, La crisi delle compagnie mercantili dei Bardi e dei Peruzzi. Florence 1926, p. 129.
of what he terms capital H humiliation, “the horrific domain of brutal and systematic cruelty”. The tormentor “denies the social world of normalized encounter”: the humiliated person is made utterly abject, destroyed, at least socially. Ultimately Buonaccorso was destroyed, as was Bice.

The second case involves the abduction of a woman and the killing of her husband. Several denunciations tell the story at some length. In May 1345 Angelo Panziere de Ricasoli approached a married woman, Monna Cemina, nicknamed Bambina, in the piazza of the commune of San Bartolomeo, which is close to the borders of the Sienese contado. He tossed stones until he broke the pot she carried on her head. Twelve days later, Angelo “like a grande and a tyrant [si come grande e come tiranno]” with his compagnia assaulted her husband, nicknamed Poccia. Holding a naked sword, Angelo said “give it to this traitor [date a questo traditore]” and took Bambina away by force. From Angelo’s perspective, Poccia in resisting his demand was a traitor. Ten witnesses from the village concurred, one of them an eyewitness. Further denunciations charged Angelo with hiring two men to kill Poccia because he did not consent to Angelo’s abduction and enslavement of his wife. The assassins caught up with Poccia at the gates of Siena, stabbed him to death and brought his severed hand back to Angelo as proof. Poccia was buried outside the cemetery. Angelo, according to one version, fed the hand to his dogs and continued to keep Bambina as his amaxia, concubine. Angelo was contumacious, and ultimately banned in a substantial fine and the destruction of his goods, as well as decapitation if captured. Efforts to enforce the sentence included heavy fines on his brothers and nephews for non-compliance, as well as fines imposed on the rector of nearby villages for failing to provide troops to aid the court’s officer in enforcing the sentence. This sentence was canceled as well in the 1351 amnesty. Again, Angelo reacted with anger when Poccia refused a humiliating consent, which would have meant dropping his claim to an honorable marriage, and then had the man destroyed.

The third case is an attempted rape by a woman’s landlord. The case is remarkable because it depicts successful resistance to similar noble demands. In early April 1346, a man named Bartolo, who termed himself a “poor and wretched person [pauper et miserabilis persona]” tearfully stated and exposed the case in a cedula to the Executor. Cherico di Pazzino de Pazzis had gone in the evening to one of the houses he and his brothers owned in the village of Santo Stefano in Pane, in Rifredi, then outside the city. The house was inhabited by Dino, a farm laborer for the Pazzi family, and his wife Francisca, Bartolo’s daughter. Francisca was cooking by the fire. Cherico entered carrying a candle. Bartolo quoted him as saying, “I have many times insisted to you that you must serve me and you have not yet done what I want, but now if you will not consent to me out of love it is fitting that you consent to me by force [multotiens requisivi te quod debere s mihi servire et nondum fecisti quod volui sed nunc si non consenties in me amoris apparret quod consentias in me per vim]”. When she refused, he extinguished the candle, and dragged her by her hair towards the bed, saying that if she did not do his will, he would cut her veins with a knife. She cried out for help. Cherico had sent her husband Dino off that morning to gather wood some distance away. Returning

19 ASF, *AEOG*, 33, ff. 41 r-42 v. The cedula was recorded at ASF, *Capitano del Popolo*, 35, f. 3.
20 ASF, *Capitano del Popolo*, 35, ff. 4 r-v.5 r. The inquest against Angelo is at ASF, *AEOG*, 50, ff. 25 r-30 r. ASF, *AEOG*, 50, ff. 28 r-33 r records efforts at enforcement; the ban of his immediate kinsmen is at f. 45 r. His sentence of 18 February 1345/6 is ASF, *AEOG*, 56, ff. 19 r-20 r; the marginalia records its cancellation. Caduff, *Magnati*, discusses this case, pp. 35-37.
home, he heard her cries and found Cherico dragging her by the hair. Dino, “oppressed with the greatest sorrow”, said, “What is this, Cherico? I did not think that you would do what you are doing to insult me in this way [Non putabam quod tu faceres quod facis in quo modo me vituperaret]”. Cherico responded, “Dino, be quiet for your own good. If you do so, I will make you a bonum hominem”. Dino responded to Cherico that he should not do rusticitates. Don’t act like a peasant. [Dino later testified that he also said, “You sent me away so you could do this”]. Then, Cherico, enraged [irato animo] punched Dino in the mouth, knocking out some teeth. Dino defended himself and his wife and the two men exchanged a great many blows.

In effect, the charge was that Cherico took advantage of his landlordship by sending Dino off to cut wood and then demanding service from his wife in the form of sex. Like the other two cases, this was about demands for service and compliance, and whether the low status man could claim honor. Dino initially characterized the attempted rape as an insult, done to himself. Cherico told Dino to tolerate his wife’s rape and offered to reward him by making him his bonum hominem. When Dino told him not to act like a peasant, Cherico became enraged and attacked.

Villagers often were reluctant to testify, surely fearing retaliation, and in this case many were surely Pazzi dependants. Remarkably, this case nevertheless went forward because of resistance, initially by two women as well as Francisca’s father. Bartolo’s initial denunciation listed thirty witnesses, all from the village. Initially, twenty-two men testified that they knew nothing, and one stated only that he had heard the story from Francisca. It was two women who testified that this was public knowledge in the village, which was enough for the Executor to refer the case to the criminal court. In the ensuing trial, thirteen men did testify, three of them men who had previously denied any knowledge. Dino and Francisca testified as well. Cherico was convicted of the assault on Francisca, attempted rape and attempted adultery against her will, and fined 600 lb.21 The Pazzi did retialiate, first by a legal countercharge of assault against Francisca, which failed. Then, according to a denunciation of late August, Cinozzo, Cherico’s son, found Francisca, attacked her, grabbed her arms behind her back and began to bind them, evidently an attempt at abduction. He was stopped by an officer of the podestà.22 Cinozzo also was convicted.

The denunciation of Cinozzo is a vivid evocation of anti-magnate language. The author urges that there is good evidence: the officer who rescued Francisca knows well what happened. “Let it please you that this crime not remain unpunished, and that Cinozzo receive the penalty he deserves, so that these rapacious wolves do not break the bones of orphans and widows and married women who are popolani”. If the Executor looks into the matter, he will find the things written here and even more to be true. The author also appealed to the reputation of the court: it should not be said that Cinozzo is vaunting himself around Florence because he does not believe he will suffer any penalty from his encounter with the podestà’s officer.23

These three stories depict the same general pattern. Men from seigneurial families sought to abduct and/or rape lower status women. In the case of Bambina and surely Bice as well, this was sexual enslavement, women forced into concubinage. Again, these were messages between men: all three nobles demanded compliance from the husband or

21 The initial denunciation is ASF, AEOG, ff. 48 r-50 r. The initial witness testimony is ASF, AEOG, ff. 54, 81 r-83 r. Francisca and Dino’s testimony is ASF, AEOG, 69, ff. 5 r-12 v. Caduff, Magnati, analyzed this case at length.
22 See ASF, AEOG, 69, ff. 51 r-52 v.
23 ASF, Podestà, 149, ff.19 r-21 v.
kinsmen, a compliance that was recognition of the noble’s power. Cherico made the message explicit: tolerate my rape of your wife and I will reward you, make you my good man. Further, all of these nobles are depicted as couching their demands in terms of loyalty and service. For them, men who did not comply were traitors. Scholars tend to treat medieval rape as impulsive, opportunistic. There are reasons for this: twelfth- and thirteenth-century literature often portrays rape in this way, particularly rape of low status women. Andreas Capellanus famously in his *Art of Courtly Love* “condoned the rape of peasant women by knights”: writing “be careful to puff them up with lots of praise and then when you find a convenient place, do not hesitate to take what you seek and to embrace then by force”.24 The medieval French pastourelles often depict a knight spotting a pretty shepherdess and assaulting her.25

These denunciations instead depict lords employ abduction and rape to humiliate and dominate dependants. Could this reflect real practice? The research of Alain Boureau and others has shown that while a legal *droit du seigneur* was a fantasy, the idea derived from criticisms of abusive lords dating back at least to 1247.26 My working hypothesis is that there probably was a long history of sexual predation and humiliation by noble landlords, though an ill-documented one, and these cases do offer a glimpse. Is it acceptable to make a big claim, based on only a few cases? The evidence for rape is notoriously poor.27 As Trevor Dean has argued, “Of all the crimes perpetrated against women, rape stands out for the ineffectiveness of the law”.28 Rape is seriously under-reported, then as now, fewer than one in ten. Convictions were rare. It was seen as a minor crime. Trevor Dean found five rape prosecutions in Bologna in the decade of the 1390s, three of them failed attempts, and only a handful in Lucca as well.29 Samuel Cohn, working in Florentine criminal court records, found five cases of heterosexual rape in 1344-1345 and two in 1374-1375.30 I have found 12 cases of rape or attempted rape in the registers of the Executor, 1344-1351. Two cases concern a pair of brothers from the Adimari family who got hold of keys to the convent of Sant’Agata, and had sex repeatedly with a conversa and a nun.31 Three more cases were failed attempts and not very detailed. In one, another Adimari with a band of armed men tried to kidnap an unmarried Tornaquinci daughter from the church of Santa Maria Novella.32 Another two involve nobles with their henchmen grabbing married women and carrying them off, though not keeping them.33 Three more are premeditated assaults on married women in their homes. In one of these cases, a della Tosa showed up with his men and a ladder to climb into a window of her house. Another is a case of repeated harassment

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27 T. Dean, *Crime in Medieval Europe, 1200-1550*, Edinburgh and London 2001, pp. 82-86, surveys the scholarship on rape in medieval European courts. This quote is p. 82.
31 This was described as *stuprum*, and the texts do not explicitly say they were forced. ASF, *AEOG*, 96, ff. 16r-17v, ff. 121r-123v.
32 ASF, *AEOG*, 119, f. 29v.
33 ASF, *AEOG*, 96, ff. 102r-103v; 157, f. 72v.
of a neighbor, including assaults on the husband and several attempts at rape of the wife, perhaps due to a property dispute.\textsuperscript{34} The remaining four cases involve abduction, \textit{raptus}.

Why so few? Rape laws were heavily influenced by Roman law and often were vague. The legal terms commonly used in Italian civic statutes were \textit{stuprum}, which literally meant to debauch or defile, and \textit{raptus}, a term that initially meant theft, in late Roman law came to mean abduction and rape, but by the thirteenth century in Italy could simply mean abduction.\textsuperscript{35} Even the famed jurist Alberto Gandino evidently found the term confusing. During his sindication after a term as a judge in Bologna the legality of one of his judicial actions was questioned because he had had a man suspected of \textit{raptus} tortured, which was legal in a case of carnal knowledge, but not in a case of abduction.\textsuperscript{36}

Rape cases often hinged on the victim’s sexual reputation, because an accused man’s best defense was to prove that the woman was \textit{inhonesta}, a woman of bad character who could not be raped. A woman and her family might use a rape accusation in an effort to force a marriage between the alleged rapist and victim. Otherwise, they would hesitate, since the law was ineffective and the damage to a woman’s reputation could outweigh the satisfactions of justice. A case, after all, would be very public. In many Italian towns, including Florence, women had to testify on the steps of the town hall, rather than within the judge’s chamber. Further, in the Florentine statute the penalty depended on the status and condition of the woman. In effect, medieval women had strong incentives not to report rape, and when cases do exist, the evidence typically concerns the victim’s status and reputation rather than the social context or the impact on her kin. The denunciations to the Executor are a rare exception because of their purpose. Denouncers told their stories in terms of noble abuse of power, depicting lords as enforcing their power through rage and humiliation, sexual abuse of women used as a message between men. The denunciations should be located in the complex power struggles of the fourteenth century, as the Florentine commune sought to impose control over the \textit{contado} and local communities or factions sought ways to make use of the machinery of the Florentine state.\textsuperscript{37}

It would require a second paper to make this case in detail, but these denouncers from the \textit{contado} were acutely aware of the contests between the Florentine commune and local lords like the Pazzi, Ricasoli and Conti Guidi. Recall that in the first case, Chele Nutini’s initial complaint was that Count Guido treated him like a \textit{fidelis} when in fact he was now a free \textit{popolano} of Florence. The denunciations after all were direct appeals to Florentine state authority: it is not altogether surprising that denouncers told these stories that demonized noble landlords as magnates who sought the humiliation of other men. These Florentine cases suggest a need to rethink medieval rape and kidnap. One obvious parallel is

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\item \textsuperscript{34} ASF, \textit{AEOG}, 122, ff. 27r; 96, f. 102r.; f. 122, 5r.
\item \textsuperscript{37} One starting point for the very extensive literature is the work of Paolo Pirillo; see his \textit{Costruzione di un contado: I Fiorentini e il loro territorio nel Basso Medioevo}, Florence 2001.
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its role in war. Recent events have forced a general recognition that rape is not an accidental byproduct, but a strategy of war.38

There are far too many well-documented modern horrors: the Korean ‘comfort women’, or rape as an aspect of genocide in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, the Congo, the Sudan Works like the anonymous diary *A Woman in Berlin* have sparked serious study of sexual violence during the Second World War in Europe.39 We know more generally that rape profoundly affects not only female victims but their families and communities. In a 2008 interview, Stephen Lewis, former UN special envoy for HIV Aids in Africa, spoke of sexual violence in exactly these terms: “In the Congo, rape is no longer merely a weapon of war. Rape is a strategy of war, employed to humiliate entire families and communities through their women in order to take possession of resources, or to turn the women into sex slaves”.40

The cases I have discussed from mid-fourteenth century Florence suggest that rape could similarly be a way to humiliate, to take resources, to dominate. It is important not to lose sight of the abducted women. One consequence of treating rape as messages between men is that the complexity of the experiences and responses of the women can become invisible. They disappear from the denouncers’ stories, which become about power struggles between men. The Florentine statute required that an abductor be compelled to return the woman to her family, but it is not clear that this happened in practice. There certainly was no suggestion in these legal texts that Bice or Bambina should be returned to their families. Why? Perhaps the answer is suggested by an anecdote cited by Americanist historian James Brooks, in which we hear indirectly of the feelings of a captured woman. In the 1820s an American trader encountered six Mexicans living as captives with a band of Comanches. He learned that one woman’s father had offered to ransom her, but she “preferred to remain with her masters, rather than encounter the horrible ordeal of ill-natured remarks to which she would inevitable be exposed on being returned to civilized life”. Because her captors had given her a disfiguring tattoo, because she had been married and now was possibly pregnant, she would be more unhappy returning to her father.41 Five of the six captives preferred to stay.

I have suggested that the relationship between elite violence and state authority was complex and at times intersected. Even a tribunal charged with restraining nobles might in practice reinforce their prerogatives. Further, Florentines depicted displays of emotion as part of the culture of violence, including shows of rage and the humiliation of men through the abduction of their kinswomen. Finally, although rape is difficult to study because of the lack of evidence, in these records abduction and enslavement feature as strategies of domination.

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38 D. E. Buss, “Rethinking ‘Rape as a Weapon of War”, *Feminist Legal Studies*, 17, (2009), pp. 145-163, discusses the implications of analyzing rape in terms of “messages passed between men”. She argues that this approach can obscure the complex reasons particular individuals were attacked and their experience.


